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Burnout among English Language Teachers in Iran: Do Socio-demographic Characteristics Matter?

Karim Sadeghi^{a,*}, Sima Khezlou^b

^{a, b} Urmia University, Val Fajr 2 Street, Urmia, Postal code: 57198-84375, Iran

Abstract

The present study aimed at extending prior studies on teacher burnout by exploring factors which contribute to Iranian English language teachers' feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Data were collected via a survey that employed the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1986). Overall, findings revealed that English teachers (N = 40) were experiencing high levels of reduced personal accomplishment (M = 18.72) and emotional exhaustion (M = 17.80). Results of one-way ANOVA showed significant differences among foreign language teachers with respect to burnout subscales. From among age, gender, marital status, and level of education, only the level of education had a significant, moderate, and positive relationship with burnout. Results are discussed in relationship to findings from international studies related to English language teachers' burnout, and the theoretical and practical implications are highlighted.

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Keywords: English language teachers; burnout; emotional exhaustion; depersonalization; reduced personal accomplishment; socio-demographic characteristics

1. Introduction

Although the teaching profession attributes a high reverence to the persons practicing it, the fact that teachers need to fulfill a profession and are expected to obtain the satisfactions resulting from the positive impacts on the students' learning and behaviour, it still presents a sort of challenge. To these are added other problems related to the students (lack of motivation, aggressiveness, problematic students, problems in interacting with

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +989143483849
E-mail address: k.sadeghi@urmia.ac.ir

students, student misbehaviours, etc.) or the problems caused by the work demands, lack of social support, lack of self-regulatory activity, and so many others which make the picture of the challenge sources much more sophisticated.

All of the above mentioned phenomena lead to teacher burnout syndrome which can be defined as “an emotional state which generates the loss of positive, optimistic beliefs and feelings, sympathy (compassion) and respect for others. This fatigue is often accompanied by physical fatigue, illnesses, and disorders which develop towards a psychosomatic syndrome” (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). In fact, Maslach and Jackson (1986) proposed a three dimensional model of teacher burnout, later redefined (Maslach et al., 2001), consisting of: emotional exhaustion (involving feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and entrapment), depersonalization (a physical exhaustion caused by low energy, chronic fatigue, and weakness) and reduced personal accomplishment (the development of negative reactions to the work, people, and self). Maslach (1993) considered the emotional aspect of burnout as its backbone. Considering the emotional exhaustion, the worn out teacher’s emotional resources are depleted because too much energy has been used for too long a time. Emotional exhaustion dimension of burnout, then received impressive attention from several researchers in the field (Garland, 2004; Garner, Knight, & Simpson, 2007; Keinan & Maslach-Pines, 2007; Pines & Keinan, 2005). As far as depersonalization is concerned, burnout teachers have feelings of helplessness and being powerless. Also, particular cognitive abilities such as attention may be detached and become more rigid. The third stage of burnout, namely, the reduced sense of personal accomplishment, gives way to less job-related commitment, impaired performance, and turnover. Burnt out teachers feel as consumed and used up, and have nothing left to dedicate to the students’ learning.

In sum, the research shows that burnout is a process that takes time to appear in an individual and therefore can be related to various reasons. Next section examines the literature on possible sources of burnout.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Sources of teacher burnout

Working and being in direct contact with individuals can have relevant remuneration or challenges. Language teaching is considered as placing a heavy burden on teachers because of a number of factors. Schaufeli and Buunk (2003) identify quantitative work demands, role problems, lack of social support, lack of self-regulatory activity, and student related demands as major causes of burnout. Quantitative work demand, according to Schaufeli and Buunk, includes stressors such as the number of hours of instruction, amount of direct student contact, and the seriousness of the students’ problems. Role problems refer to role conflict and role ambiguity that individuals experience because of the conflicting job demands. Another serious cause of burnout, according to Schaufeli and Buunk, is the lack of social support. Lack of social support from supervisors, administrators, and colleagues has been found to have a positive relationship with burnout (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli 2001; Garland, 2004; Kahn, Schneider, Jenkins-Henkelman, & Moyle, 2006; Llorens, Bakker, Schaufeli, & Salanova, 2006; Neveu, 2007; Pascual, Perez-Jover, Mirambell, Ivanez, & Terol, 2003; Zellars & Perrewe, 2001). Lee and Ashforth (1993) concluded that lack of social support from supervisors is responsible for 14% of the variance of emotional exhaustion, 6% of depersonalization, and 2% of personal accomplishment. With respect to teachers’ self-regulatory activities, it is assumed that teacher autonomy and self-regulation are negatively correlated with burnout. Student related issues can also be very demanding for teachers to deal with and can lead to lose of interest in the work and the loss of work commitment. Dealing with problematic students, problems in interacting with students, student misbehaviors, confrontation by student drop outs and in general student disengagement (for further discussion see Covell, McNeil, & Howe, 2009; Kokkinos, 2007; Santavirta et al., 2007) can become really resource depleting. Finally, not receiving a response to decision making has been identified as being positively related with burnout (Neveu, 2007).

Burnout can be detrimental for both the teachers and the recipients of teaching, namely the learners. Burnout devastates the psychological, mental and physical health of the suffering person (Neveu, 2007). Burnout may lead to negative attitudes associated with the person and thus causing the withdrawal from the job, declined job fulfillment, and quitting the job (Carlson & Thomas, 2006; Garland, 2004; Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Neveu, 2007).

2.2. Socio-demographic characteristics

According to Klusmann, Kunter, Trautwein, Lüdtke, and Baumert (2008), particular attention should be devoted to the investigation of individual differences among teachers that can lead to either high levels of work commitment and engagement or to teacher burnout. There have been few studies to systematically investigate the effects of personal characteristics on teacher burnout levels. Among the most determining ones there is the age of the teachers. It is assumed that younger teachers suffer more from emotional exhaustion than do older teachers (Embich, 2001; Lau, Yuen, & Chan, 2005; Laub, 1998). With regard to gender, studies show that males have higher degrees of burnout and specially depersonalization (Buunk, Peiro, Rodriguez, & Bravo, 2007; Ozer & Beycioglu, 2010; Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003; Zamani Rad & Nasir, 2010). However, there are studies which indicate no relation between gender and burnout (e.g., Check & Okwo, 2012) and studies which show that burnout is more frequent and more intense in female teachers (Dumitru & Talpos, 2012). Another influential personal variable contributing to burnout is the marital status. There are contradictory results in this regard, with some researchers believing that being married and having children may ward off burnout (Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2005), while others consider that those who are living with a partner have an increased risk of burning-out compared to singles because of the possible crossover effects (e.g., Akman, Taskin, Özden, & Çortu, 2010). Level of education also contributes to burnout such that it is believed that teachers of lower educational background experience more stress (Maslach et al., 1986). Sas, Boros, and Bonchis (2011) found that pre-school teachers experience more stress than primary school teachers in their study.

2.3. Research questions

1. Is there any significant difference among foreign language teachers with regard to levels of burnout?
2. Is there any significant relationship between foreign language teachers' burnout and their age?
3. Is there any significant relationship between foreign language teachers' burnout and their gender?
4. Is there any significant relationship between foreign language teachers' burnout and their marital status?
5. Is there any significant relationship between foreign language teachers' burnout and their level of education?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The present study was carried out as a survey to investigate the relationship between teachers' burnout and their socio-demographic characteristics. The sample of the research consisted of 21 Iranian secondary school teachers, 9 language institute teachers, and 10 university teachers. Respondents were predominantly females (N = 23) in comparison to men participants (N = 17), of whom 23 were married and 17 were single. The teachers of the present study included both the young teachers (the youngest was 23 years old, N = 32) and teachers close to retirement (the oldest was 62 years, N = 8). The mean age was 43 years. Most participants reported having advanced graduate training (BA = 52.5%, MA = 35%, PhD = 12.5%). The socio-demographic characteristics and percentages for the sample are displayed in table 1.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample (N= 40)

age	gender	Marital status	Level of education
Adolescents (87.5%)	Females (57.5%)	Single (42.5%)	BA (52.5%)
Adults (12.5%)	Males (42.5%)	Married (57.5%)	MA (35%) PhD (12.5%)

3.2. Instrument

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), a 22-item Likert-type scale, was used as a measure of teacher burnout (Maslach et al., 1996). The inventory consisted of three subscales: emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (D), and personal accomplishment subscale (PA). Higher emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and lower personal accomplishment lead to high burnout status (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Reliability coefficients for the three subscales ranged from 0.70 to 0.85. These three burnout dimensions have been confirmed in factor analytic studies (Schaufeli & Van Dierendonck, 1993, 2000).

3.3. Procedure

The inventory was distributed to 40 teachers in the first half of the academic year before the term-break. The statistical analysis of data was done using Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS 17) for Windows. The results were evaluated by employing means, standard deviations, Point-Biserial and Pearson correlation coefficients, and a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA).

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics for dimensions of burnout

In specifying the differences among foreign language teachers with regard to the dimensions of burnout, a one-way ANOVA was conducted. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for dimensions of teacher burnout.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics results for burnout dimensions

Table 2: Descriptive statistics results for burnout dimensions								
Burnout	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Emotional exhaustion	40	.3390358	1.00866496	.15948393	.0164491	.6616225	-.74260	3.55936
Depersonalization	40	-.7917664	.45888749	.07255648	-.9385257	-.6450070	-1.23425	.73236
Personal unaccomplishment	40	.4527306	.92315658	.14596387	.1574908	.7479704	-.86551	3.31354
Total	120	.0000000	1.00000000	.09128709	-.1807576	.1807576	-1.23425	3.55936

A comparison of teacher burnout means across its dimensions showed that the participants experienced high levels of personal unaccomplishment ($M = 0.45$, $SD = 0.92$) and emotional exhaustion ($M = 0.33$, $SD = 1.00$). One-way ANOVA results are reported in table 3.

Table 3. ANOVA results for burnout differences

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	37.872	2	18.936	27.309	.000
Within Groups	81.128	117	.693		
Total	119.000	119			

ANOVA test revealed that there were significant differences among language teachers in terms of their burnout ($F(2, 117) = 37.87, p = .000$). Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey test indicated that the mean score for depersonalization ($M = -.79, SD = .45$) was significantly different and lower from that of reduced personal accomplishment ($M = 0.45, SD = 0.92$) and emotional exhaustion ($M = 0.33, SD = 1.00$). Reduced personal accomplishment and emotional exhaustion did not differ significantly from each other, however.

4.2. Burnout and socio-demographic characteristics

4.2.1. Burnout and age

In order to examine the relationship between teachers' burnout and their age, a Point-Biserial correlation coefficient was run.

Table 4. Correlation results for burnout and age

		Burnout	Age
Burnout	Pearson Correlation	1	-.254
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.119
	N	40	40

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As shown in table 4, there was no significant relationship between burnout and age of the teachers, indicating that adolescent and adult teachers experienced burnout to the same degree. Therefore, this result annuls the findings of other previous studies suggesting that younger teachers are more sustainable to the burnout syndrome (Embich, 2001; Lau et al., 2005; Laub, 1998).

4.2.2. Burnout and gender

The result of Point-Biserial test for the relationship between teachers' burnout and their gender is presented in table 5.

Table 5. Correlation results for burnout and gender

		Burnout	Gender
Burnout	Pearson Correlation	1	-.081
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.618
	N	40	40

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

For the gender, results mirror those found for age as they show a weak and negative ($r = -0.081$) but not significant ($p = 0.618$) relationship between foreign language teachers' burnout and their gender. This result is therefore in line with the studies which indicate no relation between gender and burnout (e.g., Check & Okwo, 2012).

4.2.3. Burnout and marital status

To examine whether or not any relationship exists between the teachers' burnout and their marital status, the results were statistically compared using Point-Biserial correlation.

Table 6. Correlation results for burnout and marital status			
		Burnout	Marital
Burnout	Pearson Correlation	1	.092
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.573
	N	40	40

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

In terms of marital status, the obtained results showed a weak, positive ($r = 0.09$) but non-significant ($p = 0.573$) relationship between burnout and marital status. Thus, the analysis results nullify both the position of researchers who believe that married individuals might better fight off the burnout effects (see Bakker, Demerouti & Schaufeli, 2005) and those who support the existence of minimal burnout effects in singles (e.g., Akman et al., 2010). In sum, results of the present research pinpoint the important conclusion that both singles and married teachers can be prone to the detrimental effects of burnout.

4.2.4. Burnout and level of education

To investigate the relationship between burnout and level of education of the teachers a Pearson correlation coefficient was conducted, the results of which are presented below.

Table 7. Correlation results for burnout and level of education			
		Burnout	Education
Burnout	Pearson Correlation	1	.316*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.040
	N	40	40

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

There was a moderate, positive (0.316) and significant ($p < 0.05$) correlation for level of education. The results of descriptive statistics showed that BA level teachers experienced higher levels of burnout ($M = 16.25$, $SD = 9.56$) than MA ($M = 14.36$, $SD = 6.63$) and PhD ($M = 9.36$, $SD = 3.11$) level teachers. Previous research (Maslach, 1986) has suggested that high burnout levels are associated with low levels of education and according to these results this appears to be the case in the present study.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, statistically significant findings from the differences among English language teachers with regard to their burnout levels have been obtained. High degrees of emotional exhaustion and personal unaccomplishment were determined among burned out teachers. In the case of the teachers of present study, the explanation of the predominance of the emotional exhaustion is the confrontation between the belief in professional values and the destitution of appreciation of activity. Another emotional exhaustion cause that Piechurska-Kuciel refers to is concerned with the reward system. Teachers have to do more work with limited recourses, while their gratification or reward is postponed in time (see Brown & Roloff, 2011; Bucur, 2012; Cristina-Corina & Valerica, 2012) which can be a reason responsible for high emotional exhaustion in the present study. The emotional exhaustion felt by the investigated teachers can lead to depression, frustration and a decline of motivation for the

teaching process. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Sas, Boros & Bonchis, 2011; Schaufeli, Bakker, Hoogduin, Schaap, & Kladler, 2001).

Reduced personal accomplishment was the other factor that significantly contributed to the teachers' burnout. This finding can be explicated by noting that teachers feel psychological pressure on themselves because of the increasing significance placed on the education and this leads to negative feelings and perceptions of inadequacy. Austin, Shah and Muncer (2005) proposed that "problem solving, seeking social and emotional support, noncompetitive exercise, relaxation, and an effort to create positive meaning are possible positive coping strategies" (p. 74) that teachers can solicit to prevent or reduce their personal unaccomplishments. Chan and Hui (1995), too, identified playful problem solving as a coping strategy to enhance personal accomplishment.

One of the individual characteristics which was considered to predict the Iranian ELT teachers' burnout was the age factor. Overall, the teachers in this sample were considered as adolescents, with only 12.5 percent (N = 8) beyond the age of 43 years. As a result, it was not surprising that age was not an influential factor upon the language teachers' burnout. This finding, however, has significant implications for different individuals such as teacher trainers, less experienced teachers, and administrators. These individuals can find ways of avoiding the appearance of teacher burnout as an increasing number of young teachers are employed to replace the retired teachers.

This study could not empirically demonstrate a relationship between burnout and gender of English language teachers which is in line with other studies (Boydak, 2009; Check & Okwo, 2012). Nevertheless, it can be effective to monitor and evaluate degrees of burnout as stressors influence the teaching of both sexes (Buunk, Peiro, Rodriguez, & Bravo, 2007; Dumitru & Talpos, 2012; Ozer & Beycioglu, 2010; Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003; Zamani Rad & Nasir, 2010).

Results failing to support a relationship between marital status and teacher burnout confirm the findings of some studies (e.g., Boydak, 2009) and contradict some previous research, though conflicting evidence exists in the literature (Akman et al., 2010; Bakker, Demerouti & Schaufeli, 2005; Egyed & Short, 2006). Most researchers, however, believe that burnout can create the effect of crossover from one person to another (Bakker, Schaufeli, Sixma, & Bosveld, 2001; Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2003b; Pavett, 1986; Westman & Etzion, 1995, 1999). Crossover is defined by Bakker et al. (2001) as "dyadic, inter-individual transmission of stress or strain that occurs *within* a particular domain such as the workplace or the family" (p. 662). Nevertheless, since it is found that "the emotions expressed by one partner elicit an *empathic reaction* in the other partner" (p. 682), further studies should be carried out to investigate the possible processes responsible for crossover.

The last individual variable assumed to have an influence on the teachers' experienced burnout was their level of education. Although participants had higher education levels, most of the teachers were at the BA level (52.5%). Results of correlation found a statistical significant relationship between the investigated teachers' level of education and their experienced stress. Results of descriptive statistics, confirming the results of previous studies (e.g., Maslach, 1986; Sas, Boros & Bonchis, 2011), showed that BA teachers had higher levels of burnout than MA and PhD level teachers. Teachers of high educational level develop more realistic expectations which permit them to experience a greater sense of accomplishment and lower level of stress in their teaching.

"The literature on teachers' stress management typically has focused on stress-reduction activities, including relaxation training and physical exercise" (Farber, 2000, p. 688). However, in order for burned out teachers to renovate their job commitment, these stress reduction activities would not be sufficient and teachers need to "make significant modifications in their appraisals that they are at least partially successful at the job and/or receiving adequate rewards or perks for the work" (Farber, 2000, p. 688). In fact, schools play an important role in treating teacher burnout which should not be belittled. There should be an adequate consideration of the needs of the teachers as well as those of students. In sum, this study advocates the argument that problems associated with burnout outstretch beyond the person. Consequently, organizations, in this case, teacher preparation programs, schools and educational systems, must work to mediate the problems. It is suggested that school administrators can

provide clear and reasonable expectations for language teachers, provide positive response consistently, and engage in collaborative problem solving.

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